NAXOS
A Guided Tour of
The Romantic Era
Volume 8

LISZT, FRANZ (1811–1886)

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WAGNER, RICHARD (1813–1883)

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GOUNOD, CHARLES-FRANCOIS (1818–1893)

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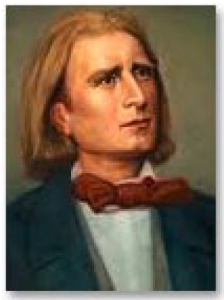


LISZT, FRANZ (1811–1886)

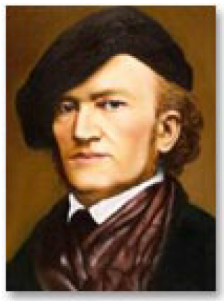
Liszt was the archetypal Romantic artist, his life and music both full of contrasting extremes. He was Europe's most celebrated virtuoso pianist, he had a scandalous love life, yet at the same time he had a deeply contemplative and religious side. Born in a German-speaking area of Hungary, he was a child prodigy. At a very young age, he had the opportunity to play the piano to Beethoven, who was so impressed that he made the uncharacteristically tender gesture of kissing the boy on his forehead. When Liszt was twelve his family moved to Paris, which seemed the obvious place for the boy to develop his talents. Here, he became friends with many of the leading lights in the musical world. Since his early teens, Liszt had been making concert tours of Europe, accompanied by his father, and before long he enjoyed a celebrity status to rival that of any modern-day pop star. In 1848 Liszt gave up his fifteen-year career as a concert pianist and settled at Weimar as Court Director of Music. He spent the next ten years promoting new music, conducting, and teaching. He took minor orders in the Catholic Church and was thereafter known as Abbé Liszt, spending his remaining twenty years between Rome, Weimar and Budapest. He died on 31 July 1886.

ORCHESTRAL MUSIC (Tracks 1-2)
Liszt's symphonic poems met strong criticism from champions of pure music, who took exception to his attempts to translate into musical terms the greatest works of literature. He also wrote several programmatic symphonies, including the so-called *Faust Symphon*y after Goethe and the Symphony on Dante's *Divina commedia*.

CONCERTOS (Tracks 3-5)
Liszt wrote two piano concertos, and, among other works for piano and orchestra, a *Totentanz* ('Dance of Death') and a Fantasy on Hungarian Folk-Melodies. The concertos give full reign to his pianistic gifts and musical imagination.

PIANO MUSIC (Tracks 6-16)
Liszt wrote a great deal of music for the piano, including original works and transcriptions (especially of opera). Among his most famous works are the *Études d'exécution transcendante d'après Paganini*, dedicated to Clara Schumann, the *Études d'exécution transcendante*, the evocative *Années de pèlerinage* ('Years of Pilgrimage'), and the Hungarian Rhapsodies, which are inspired by Hungarian folk-music. His magnificent Sonata in B minor is a true masterpiece.

OTHER SELECTED WORKS (Tracks 17-18)



WAGNER, RICHARD (1813–1883)

Wagner was a remarkable innovator in terms of both the harmony and structure of his work, stressing his own concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the 'total work of art', in which all the arts were brought together into a single unity. As a boy in Leipzig Wagner was inspired by the example of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, while his literary ambitions drew strength from a study of Shakespeare. After working as chorus-master at the opera in Würzburg, he moved to Dresden, but in 1849, involvement with revolutionaries forced him to flee to Switzerland. The following years brought growing achievement as a composer. Wagner enjoyed the support of King Ludwig II of Bavaria and was finally able to establish his own theatre and festival at the Bavarian town of Bayreuth, realising a long-held dream. In 1870 he married Cosima von Bülow, the daughter of Liszt. He developed the use of the leitmotif (in German *Leitmotiv* – 'leading motif') as a principle of musical unity, his dramatic musical structure depending on the interweaving of melodies or fragments of melody associated with characters, incidents or ideas in the drama. He died in Venice on 13 February 1883, where he had travelled with his family for the winter.

OPERA (Tracks 19-29)
Wagner termed his operas 'music dramas', and envisioned them as a new synthesis of all the arts, creating a *Gesamtkunswerk,* a total work of art. Most of his operas deal with pseudo-Nordic mythology, culminating in his massive Ring cycle, which consists of four separate operas. Other music dramas by Wagner include *Tristan und Isolde, Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* ('The Mastersingers of Nuremberg'), and his final work, *Parsifal*.

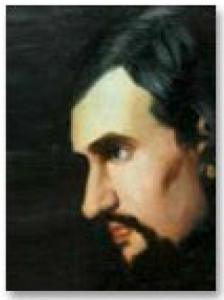
OTHER SELECTED WORKS (Track 30)

VERDI, GIUSEPPE (1813–1901)

Giuseppe Verdi's career spans three quarters of the nineteenth century. He was born in 1813 at Roncole, near Busseto, the son of a tavern-keeper, and distinguished himself locally in music. The encouragement and patronage of his future father-in-law, Antonio Barezzi, allowed him further study in Milan, before he returned to Busseto as maestro di musica. His first venture into opera was with Oberto, in 1839, and it was reasonably successful, but was followed by the failure of *Un giorno di regno.* His early reputation was established by the opera *Nabucco,* staged at La Scala in Milan in 1842. Verdi's subsequent career in Italy was to bring him unrivalled fame, augmented by his reputation as a patriot and a fervent supporter of Italian national unity. His association with the singer Giuseppina Strepponi led to their marriage in 1859, the year of his opera *Un ballo in maschera.* He completed his last opera, *Falstaff*, in 1893, four years before her death, but felt himself unequal to further Shakespearian operas that were then proposed. He died while staying in Milan, early in 1901, his death the subject of mourning throughout Italy.

OPERA (Tracks 31-38)
Verdi's name is synonymous with nineteenth-century Italian opera, and his melodic gifts and sensitive orchestration were unsurpassed. The best-known of his 28 operas are *Rigoletto, La traviata, Macbeth*, *Simon Boccanegra, Aida, Otello* and *Falstaff,* though there are several others that have retained a firm place in the repertory.

CHURCH MUSIC (Tracks 39-40)
In addition to settings of the *Te Deum* and the *Stabat mater*, Verdi wrote an impressive large-scale setting of the Requiem, its origin stemming from the death of Rossini in 1868. It is a work of operatic magnificence, none the less moving for its theatrical elements.



GOUNOD, CHARLES-FRANCOIS (1818–1893)

Gounod's family had a strong cultural tradition. His father, a painter, had won the second Prix de Rome in 1783. His mother was a pianist, a pupil of Louis Adam, father of the composer Adolphe Adam. Gounod was educated at the Paris Conservatoire, where he won the Prix de Rome in 1837. He spent two years at the Villa Medici in Rome, followed by travel in Germany. In the church music he heard, notably that of Palestrina, he discovered a repertoire that he greatly admired. He met Mendelssohn's sister, who introduced him to the music of Bach and Beethoven, and to the writings of Goethe. In Vienna, Gounod met Otto Nicolai and, in Germany, Mendelssohn. Returning to Paris with an unusually wide experience of musical traditions, he continued to write church music, but also achieved considerable success in the theatre, particularly with the opera *Faust* in 1859. He moved to England in 1870 because of the Franco-Prussian war. There he wrote music to suit the prevailing tastes of the time, composing for the flourishing English choral societies, and appearing as a choral conductor. Much of this work has not lasted well. Returning to Paris, he composed further settings of the Mass. Today his songs form a significant element in the body of French vocal music.

OPERA (Tracks 41-44)

Goethe's drama *Faust* had a wide influence over artists of all kinds during the 19th century, a period when Faust might be identified by some with the heroic artist and champion of freedom from conventional restraints. Gounod's opera *Faust* is concerned principally with Faust's seduction of Marguerite, whose own redemption is secured while Faust remains the prey of the devil Mephistopheles. Recital arias from *Faust* include the Mephistophelean 'Le Veau d'or' ('The Golden Calf'), the tenor 'Salut! Demeure', and Marguerite's jewel song, 'Ah! je ris'. Choral societies have enjoyed the famous 'Soldiers' Chorus', while the Walpurgisnacht ballet music has provided orchestras with an item of concert repertoire. Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*, an operatic version of Shakespeare's play, was staged in Paris in 1867. Juliette's waltz song 'Je veux vivre' is a familiar soprano aria, while tenors express their feelings in Roméo's 'L'amour, l'amour'.

CHURCH AND CHORAL MUSIC (Track 45)

Gounod's church music has seemed to some excessively sweet, a charge that cannot justly be levelled at the Messe solennelle de Ste Cécile ('Solemn Mass of St Cecilia', patron saint of music). By far the most generally known of his religious music, not intended for church use, was the Ave Maria derived from the first Prelude of Bach's 48 Preludes and Fugues. Gounod himself and others transcribed the piece for various combinations of instruments. Gounod's oratorio *Tobie* ('Tobias') was written in 1865, while the oratorio *Gallia*, described as a lament, was written in 1871, after the French defeat at Sedan.

Text by Keith Anderson, David McCleery, David Patmore and Caroline Waight